

The Ambiguities of the Escape Theme in Midwestern Literature 1918-1934

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The realistic movement in literature that emerged in the early 1920s broke with the tradition of the earlier village movement and the village apologists who had depicted life in the country and on the farm as idyllic and harmonious. Carl Van Doren coined the term "revolt from the village," which was soon applied to numerous books appearing in the late 1910s and in the 1920s, often with settings in the Middle West. In particular the literature dealing with this region has been described as a literature of protest and revolt. John T. Flanagan, for instance, looks upon Middle Western writers as primarily protesters and rebels, for whom the farm, the small town, and the city have in turn become the object of violent attacks. Although he is aware of similar protests elsewhere in the country, he emphasizes that

it is significant that in the Middle West, frequently referred to as a cradle of smugness and isolationism, there has been for five decades a strong feeling of discontent, an upsurge of cynicism and scorn for the recognized values which, translated into literary terms, has resulted in outstanding fiction. (157)

The relative comfort and prosperity which characterized the 1920s also led to a growing materialistic orientation, a development resulting in the change of old values or even their collapse. In *Exile's Return* Malcolm Cowley outlines a society of people involved in the pursuit of automobiles, radios, vacuum cleaners etc, a society in which people found less

and less time for bolts and art. This society increasingly estranged anyone who was interested in the arts and education. Writers who did not understand the nature of this society tried, in Cowley's words,

to exorcise it by giving it names – it was the stupidity of the crowd, it was hurry and haste, it was Mass Production, Babbitry, Our Business Civilization; or perhaps it was the Machine, which had been developed to satisfy men's needs, but which was now controlling those needs and forcing its standardized products upon us by means of omnipresent advertising and omnipresent vulgarity – the Voice of the Machine, the Tyranny of the Mob. The same social mechanism that fed and clothed the body was starving the emotions, was closing every path towards creativeness and self-expression. (217)

Qualities usually associated with earlier pioneer communities, like helpfulness, concern for other people, and a general good will, had been superseded by insensitivity, heartlessness, and egotism. In the midst of pastoral and idyllic surroundings with their promises of beauty and personal satisfaction, there is also the experience of the fundamental human lot of loneliness, suffering, and defeat. External forces such as new-fangled ideas, the challenge of traditional religion, the movement to the city, the emergence of the new woman as well as internal characteristics, like greed, insensitivity, and lack of love, attack and weaken the stable and settled Midwestern community and its core unit: the family. All of these elements are factors that help create a need to escape a cramping environment, where the sense of belonging is lacking or at least ambiguous. Clearly enough, the Middle West had become in Frederick Hoffman's words "a metaphor of abuse" (369), signifying materialism, provincialism, spiritual poverty, and hypocrisy, a target for protest and revolt.

Looking at different literary works in the Midwest between 1918 and 1934, it is obvious that escape is a characteristic feature. However, this is an ambiguous term in the sense that an escape may be an escape of no return or it may be conclusive or inconclusive implying total or partial repudiation. There is no such thing as an easy escape since haunting and spellbinding images of the past not infrequently perturb the mind of even the most resolute escaper. I have found works by Sherwood Anderson, Willa Cather, Floyd Dell, Sinclair Lewis, Ruth Suckow, and Glenway Wescott relevant for my approach. Some of the works of Suckow and Wescott are particularly illustrative of the various implications of the escape theme and warrant a more detailed consideration of these two writers.

In Willa Cather's *One of Ours* (1922) Claude Wheeler is sent against his will to a denominational college, which he finds strait-laced and narrow-minded and which cannot at all satisfy his needs for culture and exchange of ideas. Certainly these needs cannot be met on the farm either, which is successfully run by his domineering father, who has never been able to sympathize with his son's cultural interests. But Claude finds an outlet for this yearning in his association with the Erlichs, who expose him to European and German culture. This relationship is terminated when his father acquires another farm and expects Claude to run the family farm.

The estrangement between father and son is heightened by what Claude perceives to be his father's unrestrained materialism and never-ending business deals. Claude's alienation from his environment is further intensified when he enters into a marriage where his wife turns out to be a religious fanatic, more interested in church and prohibition work than in her husband. Even though his father's materialistic outlook is alien to Claude, his brother Bayliss is the epitome of mindless materialism and senseless greed making him even advise Bayliss's girlfriend not to marry him. All these factors combine to drive Claude to enlist in the army and go to war. Although his experiences in the war are heart-wrenching "[n]o battlefield or shattered country he had seen was as ugly as this world would be if men like his brother Bayliss controlled it altogether. Until the war broke out, he had supposed they did control it; his boyhood had been clouded and enervated by that belief" (419).

Claude's escape is well-considered and irrevocable. On the ship taking the soldiers to France there are death, sickness, and burials but, nevertheless, "life had never seemed so tempting to him" (311). He leaves without any regret but when he leaves, he "[carries] the whole countryside in his mind, meaning more to him than it ever had before" (255). This deep attachment to the soil and the countryside of the native region is a recurring feature in most of the works of this period. Instead of a life choking him, Claude finds solidarity and freedom among his comrades in the army. His new contacts, both in the army and among the French, open up new vistas to him, which his untimely death in battle prevents him from exploring.

In Ruth Suckow's *The Odyssey of a Nice Girl* (1925) Rich Schoessel's life takes a direction similar to Claude's. Here the limiting and hampering marriage that Rich enters into with Eva fits well into the pattern of per-

sonal discontent so usual in much of the period's fiction. On the surface, there is nothing wrong. Whenever Marjorie, Rich's sister, goes to visit them she is confronted with the false facade of family unity and amity upheld by Eva. But Suckow leaves the reader in no doubt about the bitterness and dissatisfaction of the relationship. Their life together is totally devoid of understanding, sympathy, and mutuality, and, on one occasion in particular, the extent of their estrangement becomes clear to Marjorie. Suckow draws a contrastive and deceptively idyllic scene in early spring. There is a tree "coming into bud," there is fresh new grass "showing under the weeds" and the hills beyond the town are covered "with soft, pale green, trees in delicate spring foliage poised lightly on the slopes" (290). But Marjorie is sensitive to the underlying tension and hopelessness of the situation. Rich's face is "thin, with his old freckles, but with restless eyes, a bitterness in the set of the lips, sharply drawn lines of dissatisfaction" (290-91). She recognizes that Rich "made no pretence of any illusion now. It was plain that he had separated his mental life completely from Eva's, and expected nothing from her" (291). Further evidence of Rich's disillusion and alienation in marriage and in life is his refusal to claim exemption from military service. Though everyone interprets this as an act of patriotism Marjorie sees through Rich's ulterior motives:

Was she the only one who knew that it was not "patriotism" at all – that Rich was going because it gave him the chance at last to break routine, to indulge that old adventurous youth that had been early thwarted, turned aside; conscious, like herself, of qualities that he had never used, and seizing this mad chance to bring them to some kind of fruition? (296)

The fruition of Rich's dream, however, is only very transitory and ends with his death in one of the military camps.

These escapes of no return imply total rejection of their Midwestern background, since the escapers do not live to prove otherwise. But there are also conclusive escapes where the escapers live or will live out their lives in complete condemnation of their origin and stay the course, although on occasion haunted by memories of their past. Although Glenway Wescott's writings, by and large, bear out a more final dissociation from his native region, Wisconsin, a careful study of his works of the 1920s also makes clear the hold that the past exerts. Biographical facts of Wescott's life in the 1920s also demonstrate that there is no such thing as

an easy severance of ties with family and region. Moving about in America and between America and Europe makes up the first half of Wescott's 1920s and then the narrative follows his eight-year period of expatriation in Europe, mainly France. This is a long period which, however, is interspersed with a number of visits to Wisconsin and his family.

In Wescott's *The Grandmothers* (1927) the underlying theme and framework is pioneering and its consequences emerging in the story that Alwyn Tower tells about his big and sprawling family. Pioneering in itself is a concept which implies both escape and the urge to seek something new and uncharted. Inevitably, what comes of pioneering is either the realization or the shattering of hopes, dreams, and efforts. As Alwyn records the history of the Tower family, their origin seems to have bred "a composite character" that may not have been as suited for or adapted to pioneering life as most other pioneers. There is a sense of frailty, refinement, and impracticality about them that to some extent disqualifies them as pioneers. The wrong choices, the wrong decisions, aborted plans, everything predisposes them to disappointment and an obsession with a "grievance," that was their "birthright."

They view life as unjust and unfair, a kind of inheritance which only leads to failed, impoverished and frustrated lives or new departures in the hope of success and reward. Alwyn's grandfather, Henry Tower, is encouraged by his family to write the story of his life. What comes out of his pen is not the full story of one generation of pioneers but enough to tell of hardships, deprivations, and thwarted hopes. Later generations, filled with ambivalence and unfulfilled longing, were to reverse the westward trek in order to escape a hampering and defeating environment and seek for self-realization and fulfillment in places their ancestors had wished to escape. In summing up his grandfather's position, Alwyn at the same time anticipates the movement of his own generation back East:

Meanwhile the West, that point of the compass which had glittered with hope like a star, came to resemble the East – the light went out of it. Many years of life had been allotted him, and with them had also been allotted hard work and poverty. Every hope had a rendezvous with disappointment. (46)

In describing the various members both of his paternal and maternal family Wescott manages to display a vast and variegated panoply of characters and their reactions to what constituted life in the second half of the

nineteenth century. However, from complicated, even embittered, generational and intergenerational relations there seems to emerge one common denominator: the unrest, discontent, and itchiness, not only of the time, but also and primarily of his family. This state also anticipates the unrest, discontent, and itchiness that will characterize the generations of the first few decades of the next century.

Most of the relatives that Alwyn grew up with are part of a pattern of movement, departures, and returns. All the divergent and conflicting forces and traits of the Tower character seem to have found their richest expression in Evan, the youngest of Henry Tower's sons and Alwyn's uncle. At odds with his father, Evan finds in his uncle Leander an initiator who awakens in him senses he is only dimly aware of. Although Evan is young, the Tower birthright of grievance has already touched him making him envy Leander "his distress and disappointment – they were experience at least; and there was no place for them in present day Wisconsin so far as he could see" (209). What he dreams of attaining is the same chance to get away that his older brother Jim has had. Feeling a closer relationship with the figures of the past that Leander had acquainted him with than with his own brothers, Evan "felt himself drawn, as a lover to a series of rendezvous, toward the places where his own life must have been waiting for him, though he had no idea where they were and scarcely cared what it was to be" (209).

The first stage in Evan's attempt to find out what and where life is involves not only his decision to enlist in the army to fight in the Spanish war but also by his subsequent desertion making him an outlaw. Succumbing to the seduction of the culture they had come to destroy, Evan opens his senses to all the beauty and the mystery that he encounters. Although Wisconsin is eclipsed by new feelings of affinity and belonging, Evan is also held back by his American background and upbringing.

Out of the small churches came gusts of incense, mystery, and muttering – God was not worshiped like that in Wisconsin. He wanted to steal inside them and lose himself in the music which laughed and cried at the same time; but he could not overcome his timidity, and in fact was half ashamed of being a foreigner and a Protestant. (213)

Being a deserter he has to stay out of the army's way and he signs on a ship bound for London. But although Evan has come the farthest of the Tower characters in dissociating himself from roots, family, and Wis-

consin, an awareness of the irreversibility of the direction his ambitions have taken him comes to the fore in painful reminiscences in which even his father assumes redeeming qualities. On the slow journey to Europe

a sharp sadness took possession of him. Wisconsin with its crops of every color, its hickory-nut trees, its white sunrises and red sunsets – he would never see them again; no one would love him so faithfully, as even his hard father had done. But it was something more than homesickness which hurt him; it was the keenest of regrets, that of a young man who has made his choice, for the infinite possibilities he has given up, when at last it is too late to change his mind. (222)

Evan's second desertion occurs in London when he jumps a ship bound for Rio. What had motivated him so far was his quest for a place of belonging and affinity, a quest which is abandoned in London when he realizes that crossing the boundaries of Brazil would not help him attain that goal. In London he becomes aware of a new sense of solidarity and togetherness with all the masses of derelicts and outcasts on the streets. National thinking and boundaries are suspended, and Evan looks upon these vagrants as his new "countrymen," with whom he shares a new and abstract "fatherland," which he feels is a state of disgrace. But when his days of misery and suffering become too acute, even this resolution of his quest cannot stop him from being haunted by images and memories of Wisconsin, a benchmark of the extent of his comedown. "He measured his misery by the dreams which ravished him in the damp, sagging bed—dreams of baking day in Wisconsin, of oranges and apples, of trumpets which sounded like small, southern roosters and woke him up" (227).

However, Evan whose "only ambition was to escape the ambitions which others might have for him and oblige him to fulfill" (231) falls in love, marries, and lets himself be persuaded to go back, first to Mexico City and then to New Mexico where he becomes a successful rancher. What is problematic about this is that being a deserter and still an outlaw he has to take "leave of himself" and live under an assumed name, a stranger in his own country.

When after many years Evan attempts a reconciliation with his family, the outcome can hardly be termed a success. Although his mother is anxious to make his visit as nice as possible, his brother Ralph's resentment at having been let down by both brothers is apparent and his stubborn, principled father refuses to acknowledge his errant son.

Ruth Suckow's crowning achievement *The Folks* (1934) pursues the theme of escape, flight and quest the furthest. Here Fred and Annie Ferguson lead an ostensibly happy and successful family life with their children. The underlying framework is the contrast between the traditional stable Midwestern home and a growing sense of homelessness, between content and discontent, continuity and change. The ensuing conflicts and differences of opinion result in a split and divided family.

Margaret is the one of all of Suckow's characters who is most acutely out of tune with family and environment. Even as a child she always thought that "her real home had never been this house, or anywhere in Belmond, but in some place that she had read of, or dreamed of" (32). Her relationship with her parents, in her childhood and adolescence, is characterized by inability to communicate, by misunderstandings and mutual accusations. Margaret's traits of rebellion and independence estrange her from her family and her friends, often in deliberate actions of setting herself apart from her environment. The sense of loneliness and unfair treatment that constantly haunts her leads her to take refuge and comfort in dreams and in stories in which she is the outstanding star. Her attitude becomes increasingly uncompromising and averse towards her home and background. Unlike her brother Carl who also shares these feelings, she does not relent in her dislike for the Middle West. There is no hesitation or irresolution about her decision to leave her home behind her, because she realizes the consequences if she were to stay. "As long as she stayed with the folks in Belmond, she could be nothing but a kind of shadow, creeping resentfully about the edges of things, or staying apart in frozen agony – never able to get into the open" (332).

To Margaret the integrity of family life amounts to virtually nothing and she questions the prevalent codified and rigorous ethics of the family. What Margaret objects to in her home is not only what she perceives as the typically middle-class vices of falsity and insincerity, but also the attendant Ferguson virtues of thrift, hard work, cautiousness, and righteousness. Mostly, however, she reacts against the necessity of keeping up appearances. The outwardly united family facade which her mother insists on presenting is not a true expression of the real state within the family. It ignores the rupture between Margaret and her parents and does not acknowledge that there is "a hard transparent wall" between them. The false and hypocritical image of a loving and united family creates in

Margaret a sense of contempt and estrangement regarding her parents. "She used to imagine what kind of parents it seemed to her that she must really have had instead of just the folks" (306). The first part of the section about Margaret is also appropriately called "The Hidden Time." Margaret's profound maladjustment, sense of isolation and non-belonging would have been insupportable but for her dreams, her imagination, and her belief that this is not her real life. "Her real life had always been lived inside herself, in secret. The others were the kind of children that her mother and dad really wanted. She had always been the off one" (306).

The whole relationship between Margaret and her parents revolves around misunderstanding and not wanting to understand. Typically, her parents tell her that "[y]ou never would open up to us the way the others did" (311). It is also hurt pride and a keen sensitivity which, as a consequence, drive Margaret to constantly defend and assert herself with conflicts and arguments. Margaret "cherishes her resentment and her sense of inferiority and determines to find compensation in defiance of family mores" (Omrcanin 115). Finally, her sense of spiritual expatriation becomes so acute that her departure is unavoidable. To her, home has always symbolized imprisonment, denial of freedom and the chance of self-fulfillment. In order to make herself complete, "to find the perfect complement, the other self, who thought and felt exactly as she did" (329), she has to look for her proper place in life elsewhere.

So Margaret, at war with her parents, her home town, and Iowa, leaves for New York in quest of her place of affinity. On the train leaving Belmond for New York she reflects that

she wanted to get away from these places that kept the sense of failure alive in her – that made her as she had always been, and yet she knew she wasn't. The country itself was shadowed over with the feeling that she could find no acceptance in it. It belonged to the folks and the folks' ideas ... (332)

There is a very un-Ferguson-like recklessness in her determination to break off the old bonds, to assert herself and make a fresh start. "And even if she went on the rocks – actually on the rocks! – she had at least reached out to seize the kind of life that belonged to her" (357). Here, in a bohemian way of living, she finds relaxation, individualism, and values quite opposed to those prevalent in Belmond. Her dissociation from her

parents is more or less total and it leads to her acquiring father and mother substitutes. In New York she is closely attached to a woman, Grimmie, who "was more her mother than her *own* mother, than mama was – just as once she had felt that Frank Gesell was more her father than dad" (387). Her total dissociation from her family comes to the fore in her choice of friends, exiles and outlaws from home, with whom it is possible to achieve spiritual affinity. Her break with her background and her past is irrevocable and made abundantly clear in her adoption of a new identity and a new name, Margot.

Though she never marries, the pseudo-marital relationship in which she gradually becomes involved fits well the usual pattern of a Suckow marriage with the typical elements of unfulfillment, sadness, frustration, and compromise. It is ironic that Margaret falls in love with Bruce, a middle-aged married man who embodies all the qualities that she used to despise. Against her reckless unconventional way of living is posed his prudence, responsibility, and sense of duty. To her, he constitutes "the perfect complement, the other self," which she has always dreamed of and longed for. Margaret's life can be viewed as an extended maturing process, from a long and frustrated childhood through the mixed states of mind during her New York period to a more mellow insight into different kinds of values, which Bruce is instrumental in helping her to attain.

The climax of Margaret's quest is the trip West that she and Bruce make. Her conviction that there is a place of affinity somewhere is now justified. For the first time ever she has an inkling of what it means to belong. "What *she* felt was, that she had found her home" (429). The fact that now she even considers marriage, which used to be unthinkable, amounts almost to a surrender on Margaret's part. The sense of wonder, splendor, and *belonging* that the West inspires is juxtaposed with the fatuousness of her earlier life in Greenwich Village. Everything there felt "as if all that were something to which she belonged, and yet never could belong; for when she came to it, it was past." But here there was "something so ancient and deep that it went far back beyond personal recognition" (426), a truth that was "ancient" and "eternal."

This state of happiness, however, is shattered when Bruce announces he feels his "responsibility" and that he has to go back to his family. Margaret's reaction is typical of her fundamental independence, when she feels once more "her fierce recklessness, the thing that had made her

rebel against the Ferguson cautiousness" (443). Again she sees the old repudiated values embodied in Bruce.

In Bruce's absence Margaret manages to achieve a certain level of independence which is shattered when Bruce returns with no other offer than that they continue their old relationship, and Margaret has to accept. What helps her overcome her humiliation is the "stratum of Ferguson practical ability" which is there under her romanticism. Although these two sides of her personality are in constant opposition to each other, her position makes it imperative that both be recognized, that she make them work together. The outcome of Margaret's quest is an admission of her partial failure to realize her dreams of a place of affinity and happiness. It means a relationship based on compromise and practicality and it means the achievement of just a partial self-fulfillment. Her dissociation from home, however, is complete and conclusive. Her relationship with Bruce, a very insecure substitute for a settled homelife, is marked by unpredictability and confusion but also by an awareness that they still have a chance to come to terms with their situation. Margaret/Margot must settle for a lot less than she had set out to attain.

But there are also open-ended situations where the reader does not know anything about the outcome of the quest, which has been occasioned by a combination of both adolescence and alienation, resulting from a restraining environment, be it town, village, or family. In the inevitable railway scene the reader says good-bye to the protagonist setting out on his quest with self-fulfillment and liberation in view.

In *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919) Sherwood Anderson sees the American small town as a place of suppressed feelings, frustration, and bitterness. The small town warps and twists life for many people and, in describing the lives of these people, Anderson evinces great understanding and compassion. In these stories George Willard serves both as observer, commentator, and recipient of the confidences of the townspeople. Thus, he is implicated in the private agonies of all the various town characters. By being a listener George helps them, but eventually he will reach a point when he has to leave or stay and become another thwarted soul. His departure is foreshadowed in a conversation with his mother when he says: "I'm going to get out of here. I don't know where I shall go or what I shall do but I am going away" (47). What finally releases him from the town is the death of his mother. Though his departure is in fact a "revolt from the village" it is

not a revolt of hatred and hostility. He will carry fragments and memories from his past life with him implying a certain attachment to his past. No doubt they will recede little by little and Winesburg will become "but a background on which to paint the dreams of his manhood" (247).

The surrounding countryside is depicted in terms of beauty, peace, and idyll and seems to be taken for granted, which should be able to make up for the spiritually stunting atmosphere of the town, so adverse to personal development. These natural resources, however, are never taken advantage of.

In his first novel, *The Apple of the Eye* (1924), Glenway Wescott begins his grim recording of what constitutes life in the rural Middle West. Dan Strane, the young protagonist at odds with his father, class mates, and the country itself, becomes the symbol of the discontent and the alienation that is characteristic of Wescott's work in the 1920s. In Johnson's words, *The Apple* is primarily a novel of "initiation, secondarily one of revolt from farm and town" (8) and Mike, the hired hand on the farm of Dan's aunt and uncle, becomes the vehicle of the process of initiation and the instigator of the revolt. Dan, always aware of his inadequacy and inability to measure up to his father's standards, is drawn to his mother who becomes the mediator between father and son, whose relationship seems doomed from the beginning.

His father was a stranger – his mother's husband, his harsh critic, and his master. Dan mistrusted him, and thought him unimaginative and coarse, of commoner clay than his mother and he. John Strane had wanted a son like himself, to work with him, to hunt and fish. Instead he had fathered this moody, indolent creature – like a girl, he thought – clinging to his mother, sarcastic and sensitive, a bundle of nerves; and his mournful resentment grew. (122)

Thus, the extreme estrangement that marks this father-son relationship makes Dan all the more susceptible to Mike and his seductive ideas about life, religion, beauty, and self-assertion. These ideas counteract the standards of his mother who insists on a life guided by the precepts of "a clean body and a pure mind." Dan's dependence on her makes him easily malleable, and "she bent the sprout before it knew how to grow, moulded the green fruit in her hands" (120). When Dan discusses religion and life with Mike, he is introduced into a world of ideas that completely undermine his values and his outlook on life. Mike tells him bluntly:

"Your religion is wrong. ... It cuts us in two. It divides the body from the spirit. The body is what we are, and the spirit what we think. Don't you see what that comes to? Hypocrisy, weakness, nerves. And the reality contradicts their claims, the higher they push them, the vaguer and more cruel and more mocking they become." (134)

Dan feels that this new world means the beginning of the end of his loneliness and maladjustment, pointing to the possibility of spiritual affinity with somebody, an impossibility even with his mother. Not only is the estrangement between Dan and his father augmented, but there is also a beginning rift between mother and son. Milte constitutes the subversive element in "the Puritan idyll," questioning the authority of Dan's father as well as his mother and persuading Dan that "[y]ou weren't meant for a farmer. You won't have to stay here" (144). His preaching of a "religion of sensuality" directly counteracts everything Dan's mother stands for. Dan is the willing recipient of the seeds of doubt and questioning sown by Milte who incurs the resentment, even condemnation, of Dan's parents and aunt for "corrupting the minds of younger boys and girls with his modern city ideas" (200) and for not being a "Christian." Unable to face up to the consequences of his involvement with Rosalia, Dan's cousin, Mike goes away, somewhat surreptitiously, and leaves Dan feeling deserted and perplexed. There is no undoing the disruption that he has caused in the seemingly impregnable facade of the Strane family, which, however, is marred by the tensions between father and son.

His father's vague suspicion of Dan's homosexuality adds to the list of his son's failings. In Dan's relationship with Mike there is never explicitly stated or shown anything of a homosexual nature, but Dan's feelings, gestures, and behavior and also Mike's response definitely suggest this possibility, which is further hinted at in "their short, brusque kiss" (189) on their leave-taking. In a confrontation after his father had accused him of negligence and incompetence, Dan's confused feelings about Mike after his departure and mixed emotions about his parents and his aunt cause him to say to his father: "'I didn't ask to have you for a father'" (287). After a tenuous reconciliation Dan is buoyed by his father's offer to send him to university but also, at the same time, saddened by the feeling that "his life was now somewhere else, though he did not know where" (289).

Lack of affinity with land and people, the straitjacket of religion, estrangement from family and family values are all factors which may

have made Dan's departure inevitable, but which Mike's appearance on the scene only precipitated. Whether Dan's going away to Madison will complete the process of finding release that Mike initiated is perhaps doubtful. At the railway station "[t]he tracks narrowed away in both directions, empty and dull" (292), not holding any promise of a positive outcome of his open-ended search.

Another example of the open-ended quest and escape is Floyd Dell's *Moon-Calf* (1920). Felix Fay's ambiguous relationship with the surrounding reality derives from both grandfather and father, both of whom display an oppositional and individualistic disposition. Furthermore, Felix's childhood is also characterized by a series of departures necessitated by the decline of his family's financial position. His unstable childhood and his sensitive temperament estrange him from the world of other boys' games and activities, but just as much as boys, girls are also "a part of the mysterious and troublesome real world which he feared and disliked" (64).

These early experiences, leading to escapes into the world of books and fantasy, carry over into a political commitment to socialism, which also makes him into an outsider and a social critic. His involvement with socialism provides him both with a sense of belonging and a platform for pursuing his political ideas. But since these ideas are looked upon as dangerous and deviant, they also serve to further compound his estrangement. The obtrusive and offensive reality is offset by an inner world of dreams and ideas, and there is an alternation of escapes into his inner haven and then back into real life, because the outer reality is also the place in which an idealist/poet/intellectual has to live.

However, Felix's socialism also proves a stumbling block when he tries to apply his theories to Joyce, a girlfriend of his, and argues against marriage as a conventional and bourgeois institution. Their relationship is terminated because of ideological incompatibility and Felix is left to his own devices. When, in a scene in a railway station not unique in Midwestern fiction, he sees a map "in which a dozen iron roads were shown crossing the Midwest and centering in a dark blotch up in the corner ..." (393), Chicago becomes a tangible reality to Felix, which he envisages as "a golden fraternity" of like-minded people.

It is important to be aware that when Felix, the dreaming and seeking intellectual and individualist, leaves or escapes Port Royal, his third

home town, it is on a positive note without any rankling sentiments. "He had been happy in Port Royal: it had given him love, and painful wisdom, and the joy of struggle. He would like to write a poem about it. The town had been built for him, though they who built it had not known" (394).

The escapes dealt with so far have all represented more or less unrelenting dissociation from home and village/town. But there are also inconclusive escapes in which the goal of the departure is a final dissociation, but in which no such thing is achieved. The protagonist wavers between antipathy and sympathy towards his/her native region, there are alternately embracement and denial of its people and values. This qualifies the "revolt-from-the-village" approach and makes the attitude/s/ towards the Middle West much more complicated than merely looking at the Middle West as a "metaphor of abuse."

For example, Suckow's early short story, "A Rural Community" (1922) in *Iowa Interiors* (1926), expresses the ambiguities of *escape* convincingly. Here Ralph Chapin, main character and well-traveled journalist, is being pulled in two directions, away from and back to the land where he grew up. The story describes how he comes back to his foster parents for a brief visit. The impact of the land on Ralph is rendered in poetic and wistful terms and imagery. During his world-wide travels, the experience of change has stood out as the most powerful impression, and he expects this to be true of Walnut, his home town, too. But there everything is the same. When he recognizes old landmarks, he is amused to see that nothing has changed but, at the same time, he also feels "a tinge of sadness that was like the haunting of melancholy in this exquisite autumn day" (139). Here he finds something which is not liable to constant changes but instead represents what is unchanging and permanent. The "old eternal hills" are still there and the "lay of the land stirs "the deepest feeling in a man." The way nature is rendered confirms a sense of home and attachment to Iowa's soil and countryside, which is also a reflection of Suckow's own feelings.

It is a significant Suckow trait to have an individual who returns home react so susceptibly to the influence of nature and the hold of the past. But the situation also illustrates another pervasive feature of Suckow's writings: the crucial importance of home and family. Even from childhood Ralph has been aware of his position as an adopted child, although

he has always been given the same treatment as his foster brothers and sisters. But he has not been "one of theirs" and this awareness, as well as his own restless temperament, has forced him away from home. Ralph has returned convinced of the "superiority of his life." However, he finds himself questioning his own attitude when he experiences a sense of affinity both with his foster parents and his foster brothers, although they all represent the utter opposite of his own life in terms of interests and life style.

The story points up clearly the contrast between Ralph's own hectic, restless, and rootless life and the place of his childhood and adolescence, where nothing was "new, after all, but endless, slightly varied repetitions" (167). This is a place where it is difficult to notice the almost imperceptible alternation of generations and the passage of time. After his brief visit, going back on the train, he is "conscious of that silent spreading country outside, over which changes passed like the shadows of the clouds across the pastures; and it gave him a deep quietude" (184).

In discussing the myth of the Midwest, Margaret Stuhr suggests that "The Middle West may be perfect for childhood, so goes the mythology, but not for a productive and satisfying adulthood" (25). This statement is certainly not true for many of the characters dealt with in this essay, but it does tie in very well with the story of Jim Burden in Cather's *My Antonia* (1918). His childhood and adolescence on the Nebraskan prairie are delineated in idyllic and pastoral terms and imagery, conveying the impression of carefree and unrestrained living, until in his late teens he becomes increasingly aware of another world, characterized by "furtive and repressed" speech, by "evasions and negations." To Jim, "[t]his guarded mode of existence was like living under a tyranny" (219), which strengthens in him the urge to get away.

When Jim moves first to Lincoln, Nebraska, and then to New York, he carries with him images of the past. These images crowd in upon his memory and he can suddenly find himself "thinking of the places and people of [his] own infinitesimal past" (262). Although Jim's escape from the cramping environment of the Nebraskan small town is permanent, cutting ties completely is prevented by the hold of the past, a past that reasserts itself when after an interval of 20 years Jim goes back to see *Antonia*. Although his stay in Black Hawk is a disappointment, he is still as susceptible to the old pull of the land as he used to be, feeling "the

solemn magic that comes out of those fields," making him want to be "a little boy again" (322). The old bond with Antonia is still there in the form of "the precious, the incommunicable past" (372), which is a gift, an asset, but perhaps also something with which Jim Burden himself is "burdened."

The inescapability of the Midwestern background is also briefly referred to in *The Great Gatsby* (1926) when, in summing up *Gatsby* as a "story of the West," Nick Carraway refers to himself and the other main characters as "Westerners" and recognizes something that they all had in common, a deficiency which "made [them] subtly unadaptable to Eastern life" (183). Although Nick is keenly aware of the temptation and the superiority of the East, he also associates a "quality of distortion" with the East, which is not part of his Midwestern experience.

This ambivalent attitude to the Midwest, this pattern of escapes and returns, of belonging and non-belonging, is a characteristic trait in the Midwestern literature of the 1920s. Floyd Dell's *The Briary-Bush* (1921), his sequel to *Moon-Calf*, fits well into this category. It is mainly an account of how Felix Fay gradually comes to terms with what he used to dissociate himself from. "The shadow-world of ideas, of theories, of psychic fancies, amidst which he used to move all his life, was not enough. He must live in the real world" (4). Although he does not give up his plans to write, he decides to try the real world. He finds a newspaper job, he meets Rose-Ann and, after some time, they decide to marry. On the outside it is a conventional marriage, but in reality it is a marriage well in keeping with Felix's earlier ideas. When Rose-Ann proposes that they try to give their marriage a framework of freedom "for each other and ourselves" (107) Felix readily agrees. No doubt there is also in Rose-Ann's personality a reflection of Felix's own mind divided between longing for domesticity and at the same time shunning it.

There is nothing revolutionary or subversive in either *Moon-Calf* or *The Briary-Bush*, aside from Felix's mild and harmless involvement with socialism. Although Rose-Ann considers her marriage to Felix "one final defiance and farewell to the particular tribe to which I belong" (119), it is more complicated than that. When after their separation Felix goes to California to try to get Rose-Ann to come back, the ambiguity of her situation becomes clear. To Felix's question about whether she would like to live in California, she replies that "the Midwestern winter has got into my

blood. I guess I want to see snow again!" (417), indicating the failed escape and eventual return. This is something that she has in common with many other Midwestern expatriates living in sunnier, more genial or exciting parts of the USA.

Dell was just as popular as Anderson, Lewis, and Fitzgerald among readers, but *The Briary-Bush* was less acclaimed by critics and reviewers than *Moon-Calf* (Hart 78). *The Briary-Bush* reads more like a wholesale embrace of values and attitudes questioned and repudiated in *Moon-Calf*. One would have expected a continuation of iconoclastic adventures and the quest of a young individualist but the very conventional plot and ending do not fulfill these expectations, although the final pages of *Moon-Calf* give an indication of what is to come.

One of the best examples of the ambiguities of the revolt from the village approach is Sinclair Lewis' *Main Street* (1920), a blistering attack on *Main Street* mentality and life. Reading *Main Street* is almost like studying a graphic chart, meticulously recording the ups and downs of Carol Kennicott's life as the wife of Dr. Will Kennicott in Gopher Prairie. What is depicted here is the gradual break-down of the hopes and aspirations of a young and innocent girl who naively decides to take on the reformation and beautification of her husband's town. Her initial impression of both Gopher Prairie and its inhabitants as drab and sluggish intensifies her desire to "wrench loose from this man and flee" (31).

Early on, she realizes the futility of her ambition to lay her "hands on one of these prairie towns and make it beautiful" (11). Gopher Prairie is an entrenched community, the social wall of which is impenetrable, unless social values and attitudes are shared. Carol, looking upon herself as an enlightened and competent person, finds it difficult to overlook characteristics of the community, such as social jealousies and spurious respectability. Thus, Carol's life as a housewife in Gopher Prairie is characterized by an alternation of alienation and adjustment, of seeing through the pretenses of various social sets, but also of trying hard to blend in.

Carol's various attempts at making her mark on the town are tolerated and resented at the same time, but the ultimate result is a gradual defeat in whatever area she involves herself, be it social clubs or theater associations, followed by another period of adjustment. Not unexpectedly, this pattern is also reflected in the relationship between husband and wife.

Will embraces the values and traditions of Gopher Prairie, but the inevitable clashes between Will and Carol also lead to reconciliation, albeit more or less temporary.

Carol's pervasive loneliness is somewhat alleviated by a small set of kindred souls, a few of whom survive by adjusting. However, two of them are driven to escape. Miles Bjornstam, the incorrigible, rabid radical, and Fern Mullins, a young teacher falsely accused of loose morals, are disowned by an intolerant and bigoted community. When they are gone, it becomes even more essential that Carol adapt to the social norms of the town. Guy Pollack, when prodded by Carol to take a stand, answers her that he is infected by the Village Virus. "The Village Virus is the germ which ... infects ambitious people who stay too long in the provinces" (153-4). While Carol fights the Village Virus, she also lapses into lethargic periods, letting herself be repossessed by Main Street.

Carol escapes to Washington to work in an office. Although this experience means a relief and a breather for her, she also "recognizes in Washington as she had in California a transparent and guarded Main Street" (409). Main Street equals a state of mind that has become a permanent part of an individual. People may leave their Gopher Prairies physically, but they are forever marked. Obviously, Carol has also been infected by the Village Virus. Scattered reminders of Gopher Prairie, however, serve to awaken in her a sense of belonging in and an affinity for Gopher Prairie. Her dislike and opposition have dissipated and she can even admit to loving it (425). Her revolt ends, if not in a fizzle, at least in the realization that Gopher Prairie can measure up to her aspirations.

Though she should return, she said, she would not be utterly defeated. She was glad of her rebellion. The prairie was no longer empty land in the sun-glare; it was the living tawny beast which she had fought and made beautiful by fighting; and in the village streets were shadows of her desires and the sound of her marching and the seeds of mystery and greatness (424).

About 95 per cent of the novel is taken up with cataloging all of Main Street's vices, prejudices, and stock characters, although they are only an extension of the institution which they represent, for instance, the church, the party, and the business world. Throughout this catalogue the theme of flight and escape is throbbing and when the time finally comes to escape the stages of actual escape and return are disposed of in a scanty 25 pages.

Like Lewis also typifies both the urge to leave and the pull back. But even if Suckow was part of the "revolt from the village" movement, her revolt was qualified with many reservations. Ima Herron writes of Suckow that "her earlier work did seem to belong to the revolt against the village movement, but it never had the note of intolerance characterizing *Main Street*" (410). Harlan Hatcher notes that "Ruth Suckow has joined no side in the controversy between *Main Street* and *Friendship Village*" (106).

Of the Ferguson children in *The Folks*, Carl is the one for whom a successful career seems to be clearly staked out from the beginning. Good-looking and successful at school and at sports, he is admired and emulated by other students. But as early as his high-school days, Carl is aware of conflicting traits in his personality, which will also influence his marriage. On the one hand he wants to excel and do what everyone expects of him. But on the other hand he is also aware of "a blind new desire to strike out for himself, go away somewhere, start out new, work out his great glowing ideas without the cautious limitations that he felt somehow the folks imposed on him" (129).

After Carl's graduation from college Mr. Ferguson tries to tie him more closely to the old family tradition by suggesting Carl go into banking. Asserting his own preferences, Carl objects, fearing a curtailment of his own talents. When he is offered the job as principal in an Iowa town, he is eager to take up his responsibility as an adult citizen, but he is also haunted by an urge to seek the unknown, the uncharted, something which "would have forced his life out of the clear daylight course he had set out on in his childhood" (141). By accepting the job and, marrying Lillian White, his childhood friend, he does what is expected of him.

Lillian is in many ways the opposite of Carl. She has been brought up in a repressive religious atmosphere, dominated by her grandfather. She has become fearful, subdued and unwilling to try anything new. Husband and wife represent two different sets of values which make for increasing estrangement in their marriage. According to Margaret Omrcanin, Lillian even recalls Sherwood Anderson's warped and tormented grotesques in "her fears, her sense of inferiority, her powerlessness to communicate, and her sexual unresponsiveness" (120). While this may be an exaggeration, it does underscore the difference in temperament and outlook

between Carl and Lillian. What is frustrating to Carl is not only her sexual indifference, but also his feeling of her "always holding him back, clinging to fixed ways." There is in Carl an acutely felt need to break through that attitude of provinciality which he despises, and which he sees typified in Lillian. Instead of satisfaction and content, Carl's success as college superintendent and prospects of stability in his career and his homelife fill him with restlessness, impatience, and a fear of being "left behind." There is an unbearable awareness that his "life and vigor" can be put to no use. Carl shares with many Suckow characters a longing for the past and childhood because life gets too complicated, the sense of being lost makes itself felt, and things "were no longer so simple as they had been when he was a little boy in Belmond" (154). But although Carl meets other women who attract him and who make him aware of an exciting sense of danger, "there had always been – there still was – the firm, narrow, old-fashioned, central stability of Lillian in his life" (199). All the time Carl's life is characterized by this pull in two directions, away from home and Lillian, and back.

What also exacerbates their relationship is the incompatibility of their values. Lillian's upbringing with its "almost nun-like purity" in her grandfather's house makes it hard for her to accept the kind of light-hearted jesting and jargon so common among their friends, their empty phrases of politeness. It is impossible for her to comprehend "the demands of external social courtesies on people who had been brought up under them. To her, it just seemed like being insincere – she was bewildered and disapproving both" (160). When Carl adjusts to their new environment too easily, he feels her silent reproval and counters it by accusing her: "'You'd like to tie me down to your own little principles and keep me there'" (171). Even if life in their new place is alluring and exciting to Carl, to Lillian it constitutes a "whirl of upsetting modernity" (*italics mine*) leading to a deterioration in their relationship. Although Carl is aware of his susceptibility to external influences, he ignores Lillian's exposed and vulnerable position and her objections to the direction his life is taking.

The worsening relationship between Carl and Lillian comes to a head when Carl insists on accepting an offer of a new job in Philadelphia. "'I've got to have a chance for a change and I'm going to have it. The world isn't all of a piece'" (207). To him this offer is a chance to break

- with Lillian's narrow-minded principles, to make a new start, and he is ready to cut all the ties and "to throw everything else behind him" (201). It is an opportunity to satisfy all his more or less secret needs for luxury, secularity, money-making, and splendor. But although there is this urgent desire to go away and experience new things – "he wanted to get away from their hold" (197) – Carl also "wanted the old things to hold him." .

Carl's split attitude towards home, his awareness of both attraction and repulsion, has no counterpart in Lillian. She represents a commitment to the values implanted in them in their childhood. She resents and objects to influences tending to disrupt traditional family life, and she objects to Carl's dissociation from feelings and convictions they have shared since they were children. The fact that she is firmly rooted in traditional family life proves to be incompatible with Carl's changing standards of values, leading ultimately to non-communication and estrangement. Kissane interprets the story of Carl and Lillian as showing "a Freudian concern with the unhappiness resulting from childhood repressions" (100), which further underscores the deep-rooted inflexibility of their characters. When Carl tries to persuade his wife to accept the move to Philadelphia, Lillian sees through his motives and her "hard rectitude was ashamed of his own specious arguments sliding so brightly over the hidden yet deeply known truth" (206). To go East is quite inconceivable to Lillian. It would mean a new world and new concepts which are completely alien to her. So when faced with pregnancy and the move to Philadelphia, she cannot bear up under the strain any more and attempts suicide.

Lillian's attempted suicide constitutes a turning-point in their marriage. It has an enormous impact on Carl and makes him perceive what questionable influences have governed his life so far, "his restlessness, inner promiscuousness, light attachment, selfish concern," as contrasted with "the small, simple completeness of her integrity" (227). The plan to move East is abandoned but although Carl feels disappointed and defeated, he is also relieved to find a new relationship with Lillian, based on truth and sincerity. The quest has been given up and it is probable that a certain degree of discontent will continue to be a part of his life. The following passage illustrates Carl's mellow insight into what can be expected from life.

He had nothing really new ahead of him. A certain hope, expectancy, feeling of boundlessness was gone from his work. He felt sure – he thought – of his competence, but he expected only to do what he could. The old innocent 'ideals' of his college days were like a tale that had been told. And yet he felt a kind of firmness – not wholly cynical – underlying the future. (250)

The ironic outcome of the quest is Carl's acceptance of the post as principal in a town close to his home town instead of far-away Philadelphia. But this quest has also brought about an insight in Carl into his own personal shortcomings and limitations and a recognition that he has not entirely renounced old values and ties, exemplified by his attachment to, even dependence on, his grandparents' old farm. This is a place where he can get back into "that lost simplicity," a simplicity which to him is something "healing." Carl acknowledges the outcome of his hopes and aspirations as defeat marked by "humiliation" but, at the same time, there is also an awareness of "self-respect" acquired in this defeat.

The Odyssey of a Nice Girl (1925), Suckow's second novel, is, as the title indicates, the chronicle of the development of an ordinary "nice" girl. In writing about *The Odyssey of a Nice Girl* (1925) Frank Luther Mott points out that the novel "belongs to the 'Revolt against the Village' category plainly enough, but unlike many of the books of that movement, ..., it shows genuine and unaffected appreciation of what there is of charm in the Iowa small town" (223). Marjorie's childhood and adolescence is, on the whole, carefree, happy, and comfortable, but she is also aware of the intrusive and insensitive reality, reflected in her childish dreams of going away to Boston and Europe. Intermittent spells of loneliness and dissatisfaction with her cramping environment thus foreshadow later stages in her development.

Even the qualified "rebellion" of a "nice" girl necessarily involves some strain on the parent-child relationship. Thus, Marjorie's sense of dissatisfaction and impatience with Buena Vista, her home town, is further enhanced by a rebellious awareness that her parents want to keep her near them. Her rebellion, however, never reaches the final escape and dissociation from her family that marks Margaret's relations with her parents in *The Folks*. Kissane is right in pointing out that Marjorie should not "be understood as the victim of parental domination" (61). The occasional tensions with her parents are rather the result of conflicting forces within her own nature and an expression of her will both to stay and

leave. A critical stage is her graduation, after which there is nothing but emptiness for her. Life in Buena Vista stands out in all its barrenness and lack of a purpose. People just "lived there, just lived on and on, kept stores, waited on customers, went down town to buy things for supper ..." (139). A good case in point is the new set of bedroom furniture that is her parents' graduation gift for Marjorie. Her initial joy is soon vitiated by the feeling that the gift might force a compromise with her plans to go East and compel her to show her gratitude and stay on at home. Suckow carefully records how Marjorie is torn in two directions, away from home and towards the East and back again, and how she both rejects and embraces the values and concepts related to her home, Buena Vista and Iowa. "Yet the very bonds of family ties and her contentment with the familiar from which she seeks to free herself are deterrents to her freedom" (Omrcanin 104).

When Marjorie is finally able to realize her dream of escaping to the East, although meant to be just a stage in her gradual liberation from her Midwestern heritage, the two years spent in Boston turn out to be the limit of her aspirations. Just as in Buena Vista, she is torn between conflicting forces and feelings. In the midst of Eastern refinement and culture, thoughts of home interfere "like a wound that kept aching and then stabbing her with pain" (167). When she goes back to Buena Vista for her summer vacation after her first year in Boston, her earlier disavowal of the Midwest and her Midwestern origin is reversed and her suppressed attachment to the land and a sense of belonging surface in a passage reminiscent of *The Great Gatsby* and Nick Carraway: "A deep joy of recognition stirred in her heart at the sight of the long smooth roll of the land. This was hers. The moist black earth, the rich green of late May. Her mind detached itself from the minds of the other girls and became solitary, itself, almost exultant ..." (211).

When Marjorie goes home after her second year in Boston the culture shock is even more pronounced. The absence of culture, art and beauty upsets her and she feels entrapped by social life in Buena Vista. The urge to light out and enjoy freedom and independence in other, preferably far-away places is acutely felt. But at the same time, "that *treacherous* clinging love of home, of the lawn, the flowers, every piece of furniture, pulled her back, held her" (266, *italics mine*).

However, a stage of temporary reconciliation with home and Buena

Vista is reached when her mother falls ill. Now the roles are reversed: She is there because her parents need her and Marjorie realizes she is happier at home than anywhere else "when there was actually a reason for her being there" (288). But Marjorie's patience is again put to the test when she has to go to the doctor and finds herself to be part of the circle of boring, aging, middle-class women with real or imagined ailments that she has always despised.

This is a critical stage for Marjorie. In reviewing her situation, it is obvious that all her escapes and returns, her aspirations and ambitions, have been to no avail. She is still stuck in Buena Vista and almost part of life there. She and her friends seem to have passed "out of that bright certainty of childhood into some limbo of middle youth" (307). But "her feeling of rebellion, misunderstanding, helplessness" (343), still burning, precipitates her final escape, which occurs after the death of her father. There is a complete severance of ties with her past when she decides to go West and accept an offer of a job there.

The novel ends in an abrupt and inconclusive way. Eventually, her mother goes West, too, and on a visit to Buena Vista she tells her old friends that Marjorie has married and settled down on a fruit farm. The outcome of Marjorie's odyssey seems to bear out her reflection earlier on in Buena Vista that "[l]ife did not seem to turn out as they had thought it must" (309). But the odyssey has also mellowed her and made her aware of the virtues of a home, of belonging, an insight that maturity brings: "Somehow she must get that satisfaction that was a warmth in the blood, that gave all life a glowing pattern. The two ways made each a different pattern; but the patterns were intertwined" (348). Even if Marjorie's old plans and dreams came to nothing it must not be forgotten that she managed to tear herself away from home and the Midwest and to create her own home out in the West, despite the hold the Midwest undoubtedly had on her.

Although it is not spelled out explicitly, the tenor of the novel indicates a partial acceptance of Midwestern ways and values, formerly repudiated by Marjorie. Kissane is probably right in her estimation of what the future has in store for Marjorie when she writes that "[t]he commonplace marriage is recognized as Marjorie's true destiny" (64). In the light of her earlier aspirations and hopes, Marjorie's escape, or rather escapes, and quests are unresolved and incomplete.

There is a variation on this approach in Wescott's *The Grandmothers*. When Alwyn's great-uncle Leander joins the army to fight in the Civil War, he is motivated not only by his sense of duty, but also by conflicting feelings for his brother Hilary and his fiancée Rose Hamilton, whom Leander's brother Henry Tower later proposes to and marries. The incestuous relationship between Leander and Hilary is never stated explicitly, but only suggested. The impossibility and hopelessness of this relationship, however, leads to Hilary's disappearance in the war and, after the war, to Leander's departure for California in order to fill the empty space that Hilary has created. After twenty wild and unsettled years Leander returns to Wisconsin and the Towers because he "loves [his] own people more than ever before" (58). Leander's escape from both Rose and a missing Hilary, however, does not lead to an alleviation of his longing and despair but rather an intensification which gradually passes into resigned acceptance.

The farm as a repressive environment was a reality to Alwyn's father, Ralph, as well as his two uncles, Jim and Evan. The meaning of unfairness and disadvantage is brought home early to Ralph. He would have to give up his dreams and ambitions to become a veterinary surgeon, while "his brothers were going to leave the country."

[H]e would have to turn back among the still only half-cultivated hills, to go on being what they had all been as ignorant children, what their forefathers had been: a child of nature. He was strong, obedient, and moody, resenting what the future might do, as if, at the age of eighteen, the past had already done its worst. (135)

To Ralph there was nothing in the future but bitterness and resentment at having been sacrificed for his brother Jim, as poverty and limited resources made it impossible to send more than one son to college. This is a situation which was not peculiar to the Tower family but a pattern which was prevalent all over the Midwest and which would be repeated in later generations.

But when Jim, the most-favored brother, is sent to college, it is with the proviso that he enter the ministry after graduation and this way pay back the sacrifices that had been made for him. However, after some time at college, Jim discovers diversions and temptations that living in a small town brings, at least compared to living on a farm, and to which he is not immune. Jim deviates from the career determined by his family when he

tries to change "the direction of his life" by entering on a singing career with the girl he intends to marry. There is "the brilliant threshold of an unexpected life, of a career more brilliant than the ministry" (137), a dream almost come true, an expansion of his limited Midwestern origin, a chance at fruition which ends up as frustration brought about by his father's harsh and moralizing words that he has got a duty in the world. "'You've got to bear witness to the Lord. Remember that'" (144). Although Jim's escape to the little college town takes him close to the realization of a dream, his father manages in just a few words to thwart his hopes by calling on his sense of obligation and commitment to his family, thus enforcing Jim's compliance. "Whether he lilted it or not, it would be a lifework in itself to recompense them for the opportunities they had given him; whatever he wanted to represent, from now on he would have to represent their ideals. Perhaps, he thought that is all it means to be a servant of God" (143).

When, in the service of a fashionable church outside Chicago, Jim comes back for regular visits to the farm the crudeness of his birthplace, "the labor, the poverty, the narrowness of outlook, which were still established when he had been born" (178), is mercilessly juxtaposed with the elegance and comfort of his life in Chicago. Having married into a wealthy family, Jim retires to serve his new family completely. This shows Jim's weak and yielding character and even Alwyn notices how he gives up "every least ambition."

The progression of Jim's attempt at liberating himself from the restrictiveness of his background shows the futility of his ambition. Giving in to the comfort, idleness, and luxury of a wealthy marriage and his attendant come-down as merely a servant and janitor only earn him the censure of Marianne, his sister-in-law and Alwyn's mother, who accuses him of wasting "his opportunities and [exchanging] the family birthright of anxiety, ambition, and loneliness, for the comfortable approval of a family that was not even his own" (197).

In *The Apple* Wescott initiates a thematic pattern of movement, which is developed and expanded in *The Grandmothers*. This approach is further pursued in *Good-Bye Wisconsin* (1928), a collection of short stories. Of particular interest is the title-story "Good-Bye Wisconsin," which in Rueckert's words is "a hodge-podge of highly wrought fragments elicited by Wisconsin, the Midwest, and America and held together by Wescott's

arrival at, brief stay in, and departure from the small Wisconsin town where his family lives" (70). In an erratic and impressionistic style, Wescott expands on what constitutes the Wisconsin and Midwestern way of life and what makes it impossible. Although Wisconsin seems like "the ideal state to live, a paragon of success," what the young people mostly dream of "is getting away" (26).

"How much sweeter to come and go than to stay" is Wescott's laconic judgment of and good-bye to Wisconsin and the Midwest, a "nowhere; an abstract nowhere" (39), which represents "a state of mind of people born where they do not like to live" (39). But Wescott also wants to elevate his detailed catalog of Midwestern shortcomings to a both national and universal level, thus making the concept of Middle Western "in the commonest way human" (39). Here Wescott also anticipates Suckow's definition of "art in style" as "the shaping of the universal forces by time, place, person, and circumstances; that thought and feeling are universals, but that style – at any rate, the material, the rudiments of style – is a local circumstance" ("Middle Western Literature" 178).

All of the works discussed here reflect the complicated relationship of characters to their place of origin. A departure may seem like a dream come true but there is no such thing as a clean escape leaving no traces. There is both fruition and frustration: fruition in the sense that an escape could be pulled off at all, but also frustration because the hold of the past is still powerful and inescapable.

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